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Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Spliid, C. M., Dahms, M. L., Velmurugan, G., & Pedersen, J. M. (2018). *The multicultural group work: a challenge explored by students*. Abstract from Multicultural Groups and Problem-Based Learning, Aalborg, Denmark.

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The multicultural group work – a challenge explored by students

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Key words: multiculturalism; teamwork; engineering education;

Abstract:

In the call for papers for the conference is stated that “research has identified multicultural teamwork as a key challenge”, with socio-cultural differences being seen as a source of conflicts. One of the researchers who for many years has been promoting this view of the multicultural teamwork as problematic is Geert Hofstede, who in the early 1980s developed a 4-dimensional model of culture that has since been expanded to 6 dimensions. (Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede, 2018) Based on the 4-dimensional model Hofstede identified and explained problems in the interaction between teachers and students from different cultures and between students coming from different cultural backgrounds (1986). In Hofstede’s article the proposed solution to problems with teaching international students is to focus on what the teacher does in the teaching situation, i.e. level 2 teaching in Biggs’ 3 levels of teaching or what Biggs calls a ‘deficit approach to teaching’ (Biggs, 2006).

On the other hand, other educational researchers have spoken against the problematisation of the multicultural teamwork. This is for example the case for John Biggs who claims that problems in teaching international students, and more specifically students from what he calls the Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) may be minimized by a teaching approach that focuses on what students do, i.e. level 3 in his 3 levels of teaching or what he calls a ‘contextual approach to teaching’ (Biggs, 2006). To Biggs focus on student similarities is more important than focus on differences which he claims is counterproductive (Biggs, 2006)

In the midst of this intellectual discourse among learned professors a relevant question arises:

How do the students in the multicultural team themselves perceive the multiculturalism and its impact on their teamwork?

In this paper we explore this question by analysing the written process analyses from a number of multicultural teams from different engineering study programmes at Aalborg University, where the problem oriented, and project organized group work has been applied since the establishment of the university. This study is too small to be conclusive but the general attitude among student teams seems to be a general appreciation of an introductory session on the concept and discourse of culture. Furthermore, much as cultural differences are perceived as a challenge it is also seen as an advantage because it brings different perspectives and viewpoints to the table and thereby improves the teamwork.

References

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